Anna Mandler Wells and Ira Wells with Family
Elkton Oregon c 1872

From Prussia to Promise

From "A Simple Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells,"
transcribed by Mary T. Wells
Entry 1 of 4

Once upon a time as the story goes there lived a man in far away Prussia. He was born in the village Lamspach, belonging to the evangelical parish Wiesmar. His name was Johann George Mandler, a tailor by trade. He took unto himself a wife and settled down to make a home by diligently plying his trade in the town of Giessen nestled near the shores of the river Main in Prussia. In time two baby girls were born in this home with dark hair and eyes—and then again on the bright and beautiful morning of July 10, 1822 (July 10th, 1822) there came another sweet faced blue eyed baby girl with golden hair to dwell with and share with them the good and ills of life. She was christened in the Lutheran Church "Anna Elizabeth Mandler". Her childhood was not unlike that of other children in the parish. She entered school at the age of seven and was finished at the age of (15) fifteen as was then the rule and custom of that province. At her father's knee she learned the art of the needle and much of the work of the tailor which knowledge proved of great help to her in later years. Two more children had been added to the home circle in the meantime, one boy and another girl, making five in number. The father being a well informed man and dealing much with the public had in some way (I know not how) learned of America the "Land of Promise". After much careful thought he conceived the idea of launching out across the deep waters to assist in the building up of a new empire. Accordingly in the year 1839 he left his home friends and people and embarked with his wife and five children to sail towards the new world of which very little was known at that time. For three months they were tossed about by wind and wave on shipboard and were finally landed at New Orleans much traveled, worn and jaded yet with memories of many pleasures. There had been music and dancing and other amusements and diversions.

Here they were—a new world—everything so different, language different. They could speak no word of English and none could speak to them in the softer tongue of their mother country. They learned by signs and motions. The eldest daughter sickened and died there. In a few months they went to St. Louis and in 1839 the mother sickened with malarial fever and died leaving the father with four children, the youngest but three years old. They were all discouraged and disheartened and decided to push on up the Mississippi River to find a better location. Their next stop was at the town of Rock Island in Rock Island County, Ill., then a very thriving little city. The U.S. Arsenal Barracks were there, and other things of interest. Chicago was then in its infancy and very little known. The pioneer spirit kept calling and urging him on and they went to the town of Hampton still in Rock Island County, on the banks of the Mississippi as all traffic and freight were handled by boats on the river at that time. There he established himself in business again. With the help of his daughter he maintained a home and tailor shop. The work of building and developing the new country was in progress and the Mandler family entered in with heart and might to carry on the work to the best of their ability. Thus the pioneer spirit was engendered into the hearts and lives of all the children, and they learned to love the country. In later years the son and brother volunteered for the civil war service, was honorably discharged at the close but soon passed on from the hardship and exposure during the struggle.

Please Return

A SIMPLE SKETCH

of

THE LIFE OF Mrs. ANNA ELIZABETH MANDLER WELLS

Source Document

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Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt
March 13 2025

This photo comes from an old family album — one of those heavy Victorian types with the brass clasp. This particular image is loose in the front, not tucked into a sleeve. It shows Ira Wells seated, the elderly man, and Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells, with a small floral arrangement pinned to her chest. There's a formality to the photo, and it's possible it was taken around the time of a funeral, though I can't say for sure. Based on ages and other details, it likely dates to the late 1860s or early 1870s.

On the far right is my great-great-grandmother, Esther Wells Smith. Standing beside her — taller — is her sister, Caroline Wells. Caroline's story is remarkable. There's a book on the Hawley–Wells family (her husband was a Hawley) that traces the Wells line back to the Deerfield Massacre during Queen Anne's War. I'm a direct descendant of that Wells family. Caroline was a formidable woman, and her story will have its own space later. One detail my grandmother always shared: she believed Caroline was the first European child born in Lane County. There are other possible contenders for that title, of course, but she was clearly among the first babies born in the new Oregon Territory.

The smaller girl in front of them is Mary T. Wells, the youngest daughter and the family historian. She's the one who recorded her mother's story — likely after hearing it many times. That written account is what allows us to share it now. Mary also left behind other documents, including a diary housed at the Douglas County Museum, which I haven't yet seen. There's a lot more to uncover.

At the heart of this image is Anna Mandler — once a young girl in Prussia learning tailoring from her father. Here, decades later, she sits at the center of the family she helped shape. Her story is too large for a single post, so I'm sharing it in sections. Notice how well-dressed this family is. It's amazing.

The photo was likely taken at the Wells home in Elkton, Oregon, just outside what was once the southernmost British outpost connected to Fort Vancouver. The Wells family were the first settlers here outside that post. I've cleaned up other versions of this image, but I'm showing the original here — untouched. If you look closely, you can still see the rouge brushed onto the cheeks of several of the lovely ladies, including Esther. Just a hint of pink — a small, deliberate detail in a long story.